

The trouble with moving upmarket

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Poverty rates in Britain declined from 1968 to the late 1970s, but since then have risen continuously. And our report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows how this trend has been accompanied by a rise in the geographical segregation of the poor from the rich - where the two groups live physically apart.

There is some good news, though. In the most recent period, the number of households with people who are the poorest - income poor, materially deprived and subjectively poor - fell, and such very poor households also became less geographically concentrated. Government policy can, and has, reduced that gap.

The people in the most geographically segregated social group are those who were so wealthy that they could afford to exclude themselves from the schools, hospitals, cleaning, childcare, recreation and other norms for most people in society. As they grew wealthier, however, the richest did not grow greatly in number, but became corralled in fewer and fewer parts of the country.

At the extreme are the most affluent parts of, for example, the Mole Valley in Surrey, and Chesham and Amersham, in Buckinghamshire. In 1980, a majority of the population in these places were neither rich nor poor. Now only a quarter of households there are non-poor, non-wealthy, while more than a third in these areas are counted in our most exclusively wealthy category. Today, the majority of people living in the most expensive areas will have moved there over the last few decades making such places unaffordable to almost everyone else. In a more unequal society, everyone is less free to choose where they live.

In the most recent period, we saw for the first time large parts of many cities with more than half the population becoming poor. In these places, it is, in effect, now normal to be poor.

This is hardly surprising, given that just over a quarter of households nationally are poor and that there has been a rise in geographical segregation both of rich and poor over time. You would have to spread the poor very evenly in fictional mixed communities to hide concentrations with such a high national poverty rate - high both by international and historic standards.

It took a long time to conduct four surveys of poverty and four censuses, to collect other data on consumption and the assets of the rich, and to merge them to produce a picture of Britain that allows our changing geography of wealth and poverty to be mapped over thousands of communities in comparable ways for the first time in such detail.

The most obvious result is that you cannot expect to reduce poverty and the spatial concentration of poverty while wealth becomes more concentrated, both socially and spatially.

Poverty was at its minimum in the last 40 years when fewest people were so much wealthier than the average. Poor and wealthy were less geographically segregated from the rest. Given current trends, only a minority of people may soon live in "normal" households. The majority will either not be able to afford to live a normal life - to avoid debt and take a holiday, or, at the other end of the scale, they will be concerned about inheritance tax, buying their way out of state provision, and how many holidays a year they can take.

That future has already arrived in London, where rich and poor jostle together most closely. And if the long-term trends we have identified continue, then socially much of the rest of the country will start to look that way. So why let things carry on polarising when we can see that we are heading in the wrong direction?

Exclusive enclaves

Chesham and Amersham in Hertfordshire has seen the greatest polarisation between rich and poor in England and Wales since 1980. Then, 67% of its households were living in "normal" circumstances (neither rich nor poor). By 2000, that figure had plummeted to 24%. A quarter of households were rich in 1980, but this had soared to 61% by 2000. Meanwhile, the proportion of poor households went from 9% to 15%.

Other areas with dramatic recent concentrations of wealth include Surrey Heath (13% rich in 1980 to 50% by 2000) and Maidenhead (18% to 53%).

The most divided constituencies in Britain 1980-2000

Constituency and ranking*	1980%			2000%		
	Poor	Average	Rich	Poor	Average	Rich
1 Chesham and Amersham	9	67	24	15	24	61
2 Surrey Heath	10	77	13	15	36	50
3 Maidenhead	10	72	18	16	31	53
4 Meriden	16	75	9	26	38	36
5 Winchester	13	68	19	19	31	50
6 Orpington	10	69	21	19	32	49
7 Windsor	12	72	17	18	35	47
8 Regent's Park and Kensington North	30	66	3	46	30	23
9 Buckingham	12	71	17	16	35	48
10 Hitchin and Harpenden	11	69	19	18	34	48
11 Islington South and Finsbury	30	68	2	48	32	19
12 North East Hampshire	10	67	22	15	33	52
13 South West Hertfordshire	12	62	27	18	28	54
14 Holborn and St Pancras	31	66	3	50	33	18
15 Tatton	12	65	23	18	32	50

*Ranking: 1 equals most divided area, with least number of average households

Source: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Danny Dorling is professor of human geography at Sheffield University. *Poverty, Wealth and Place in Britain 1968 to 2005* by Danny Dorling and others is published by Policy Press (£15.95). Read the [full report](#)